

FILIBERTO--A Romance of the Redwoods--By Sarah Comstock

FILIBERTO paused on the steep road which led to his cabin in the redwoods, and drew a long breath; under, unconscious, heaving the one shirt like a giant billow. It was the sort of breath that men of a more employ and trammelled world rarely draw. It suggested a primitive power—a relationship to colossal, simple things, such as the redwoods themselves with their full-chested heaving.

Beside him where he stood grew a clump of manzanitas. At first he did not notice them. When at last their presence reached his consciousness he started. It was the clump. Never, it seemed, could he pass this, but it must arrest his attention, must force that old picture upon his vision.

He saw it now as always. Night—he himself riding home to his cabin—and then that glimmer which the starlight had shown him in those shrubs a mere something white beside a shadow splash of the redwoods—and it had turned out to be a girl, lying half dead here on the canyon brink. He had torn her from the branches, the stain of her own wounds and the hot berries bloody upon her dress, a broken spray of the red fruit tangled in her hair. Her horse had disappeared. Filiberto had骑ed her to his own horse and carried her to his cabin.

The story always insisted upon retelling itself every time he passed this clump. He recalled how he had gone to Lucetti's wife to nurse the girl for a night and a day she could not remember that she was the daughter of the cherry rancher in the valley below. And then had come those days when she lay slowly recovering, her sister classic, fat and wheezy, hovering over the rude bunk, Filiberto exploring the canyon for huge sprays of woodwardia and branches of red berries to deck the cabin. And then—the old Portuguese priest of the little who washed church on the mountainside had visited them—and they

resolved into its elements of newly-pungent redwoods, moist earth, up-springing green things.

Yes, it was spring. There were infant ferns, light green and woolly, curled snails along the canyon's edge. That burning skein at a brown tree-root must be a mariposa lily. It was time to be off. In the intervals of vagabondage he always wandered back to the old cabin by what impulse psychology alone can tell. But when that spring smell came he always started. Yes, he would pack the old canvas telescope which had almost circled the globe, and off the two of them would go again.

He had reached the cabin now, and he flung down his axe. The silence, ruff'd by the ax's fall, smoothed itself as hastily as a cat and lay in serene orderliness. Filiberto stood gazing lazily down the road, all at once through the silence, a small sound, creeping up the canyon, picking its way between redwood boughs, reach'd him. It was the sound of wheels.

He listened with alert wonder. These were neither the rural free delivery wheels nor those of Lucetti's vineyard wagon. And as they progressed he realized that they had passed Lucetti's moss-swathed gate which was as far as wheels ever came. They approached in arcs—they were in sight. The vehicle was old Handy's little seater and it contained Old Handy and five ladies.

Filiberto knew the three seater well. It was his, for that matter—a vehicle ever at the disposal of the California tourist. Year in and year out Old Handy waited at the railway station in the valley and every cravatéed, clad, kodak-laden figure that arrives is fish to his net. He will show you the famous hotel, the violet ranch, the winter residence of the tooth powder magnate, the palm boulevard and the Chinese vegetable gardens, all for a dollar. Four bits mur, and the mission. The above named sights had charted out,

"Here's how 't' is," Filiberto continued old Handy. "Mr. Brock's wrote a book called—"

"The Story of Ramon?" prompted one of the visitors.

"That's right. It's a grand piece.

An' it's all about you only you're called Ramon 'stead of your real name, I'lls all about the time you found Boss

where her horse threw her an' carried her up to the cabin an' all the rest of it." With another ponderous



buzzed about, pointing out his profile by his height, his Spanish eyes, as they would have pointed out the features of a palm boulevard or a violet ranch. They clamored for souvenirs, selving upon the horseshoe over his door and the bandana handkerchief lying on his table. Suddenly, not knowing how to refuse, he submitted to being snapped in a score of positions and at last, with relief, saw his visitors climbing back into the little seater.

He spoke aside to old Handy. "You mean bring me more up here?" "Don't be a fool, Fil. What's that you got in your pocket?" Filiberto was absent-mindedly jingling a goodly number of sizable coins.

"All the same, you nevets bring me no more, I say. Brock's got no business to tell about me and Boss."

"I say don't be a fool. The horse you ride on that night's dead, ain't he?" "Yes."

"Well, you get that horse so it can have its picket tools before I come with another load. Savvy? I know the one for you. Belongs to the winery man. Coal black, like Brock tells. They call it Pete the Coon, but you change its name to Fluego to match the story. An' I'll fetch you some suvynneers, Los sess you had on Mexican spurs. I reckon we could sell them spurs about fifty to a hundred times before the secon's over."

Filiberto turned away growling like an oncoming storm. "I'm goin' agoin in a week or so. Tawn' do you nevets good to bring 'em up here?" Skilfully he touched his hat to the ladies as they called their good-bys to him.

Suddenly, as they rode away, there was a commotion, a stopping. "Yes, I've got a copy. Do you think he'd like it?" "Can he read?" "Ask him," they said.

One of the ladies held out a small volume. "Can you—I mean, do you like to read?" she asked Filiberto.

He nodded and muttered, "Yes."

"Then wouldn't you like to have the story? You can read all about yourself—and learn what a hero you are!"

He hesitated. Then, "Thanks," he replied ungraciously, and took the book.

At first he did not read. He fingered it with some curiosity; turning over the pages, he caught the names "Ramon" and "Molly." The latter, he judged, was the author's name for Boss.

He threw the book down. Reading had always been hard. He had never gone to school much—even then, this young lad had been like drink to him and he had broken away from home and school to try the sea, the harvest fields, the mines, the ends of the earth.

This coming of schools vanished gradually, the places becoming again a house of cast shadows, each bird nested branch's rustic being a partition which divided one silence from the next. Again there came to his nostrils that deliciously clinging air—the odor of spring—of newly-pungent redwoods of moist earth of up-springing green things. It became more than an odor—it was a potent drug, tingling through his veins, leaching in his brain.

Yes, he would go at once. And thus he would escape further hungry packs of the curious. This thought decided him. By to-morrow, even, Old Handy might arrive with the souvenirs and a load of prying tourists.

He seized the worn old canvas telescope. He flung into it a few garments, a few worthless treasures. Among them he seized the book and was about to fling it aside.

But curiosity rose again. This was a story about him, the personal element was irresistible. Leaving off his packings for the moment he sat down in the cabin door to glance at the story.

One of us, of course, would devour too brief volume in an hour or so. But Filiberto was obliged to read with his forefinger and it progressed slowly. The sun was poised like a platter on the finger tips of the redwoods when he began. It had slipped into the canyon when he had the book down.

Up to the last act of the story Brock had kept almost without deviation to the facts. Those he had gleaned from talk with Filiberto himself and with others living therabout, and where there were missing links the clairvoyant powers of the trained imagination had supplied the truth. As Filiberto read he lived it all over again, more vividly even than he recalled it, for the mastery of that simple, magical language gave the truth new force, made it in some way truer. The white glimmer in the bushes, the ridge, the weeds in the poor little cabin, turned into a bower of berries and ferns—the wedding—the droll old rosyophilic mystic priest—and then the cherry ranch, always moving in maddening circles, flower-blazed, corals, blue-bloused Chinamen. And at last the long, ardent—the beckoning of the ends of the earth.

So far Filiberto had followed rigid, wide-eyed, marvelling. It was as if Brock had been inside him, Filiberto, during all that period. But suddenly there was a break in the wonderfully-wrought chain. Filiberto started, at once fact ended, fiction began. For you remember that Brock goes on to relate how Ramon, having wandered aimlessly, returns at last to the cabin for a space before wandering again finds that every log reminds him of Molly; at last, drawn irresistibly by the old emotion, he sets out—not for the ends of the earth, but for the cherry ranch in the valley.

And then that little scene done at the door of the ranch cottage, refusing to listen to his pleas for forgiveness. "Why, I ain't never been angry," she says. "I never thought of anything but just to wait. I didn't know when you'd come, but I was just to wait."

The night was falling, the book was done, Filiberto laid it down.

He rose and stood looking down the

road with eyes that saw beyond it. He seemed under a spell; he was no longer Filiberto, he was Ramon.

Through every detail the story had moved side by side with his own experience up to the point where the vagabond returns. So far he had been one with the hero had felt himself that being, moving through the pages of the book, but at that point . . .

He stood looking into the now bluish distance. You remember what Brock says of the night upon which Ramon decides to seek Molly.

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ceased to feel himself a chosen. His path was marked out.

Where once he would have been held by a terror lest Boss refuse her forgiveness, lest she turn him away, he now, not doubt, He paused only to recall more clearly Brock's picture. Boss would answer his ring, she would open the door, then, without a word, without a cry, without surprise, open her arms to him.

He rang the bell.

There was the sound of a door opening within the house, he saw a light advancing, shining through the transom; he heard the soft tread. His breath stopped, his throat seemed clutched. So it was written—the light shining suddenly from within, the woman's tread—there was a curious instant in which he seemed to be standing off and watching as one watches a drama whose movement he knows—and then, as she struggled a moment with the lock, he knew how they looked to-night, just as Brock had described—

Call it hypnotic suggestion, if you will—or the workings of a superstitions imagination tinged by the heritage of an emotional race—or, after all, is there any disproof of a force which leads a man forth to meet himself when he is shown that self enabled, idealized, transmuted? Whatever the cause, a compulsion seemed suddenly laid upon Filiberto. Beyond questioning he knew, as if fate had decreed it, that he must finish the story as it was written.

In the woody chill of that spring night he set out. He was all as Brock had pictured it—the moon was coming up, there was a taste of far away rain in the air, the creek was noisy. He had a sense of mechanically fulfilling a prophecy, of irresistibly obeying fate.

Step by step he found himself completing the story. At last he reached the cherry ranch; it was as Brock had described it. Acres lay white in the moonlight as if swept by a northern storm. Here was the silence and the melancholy of snow, the consciousness of death, the perishing of the flowers, which even the prophecy of a resuscitation cannot make less melancholy.

He entered the path which led to the house. Home it was written, the moonlight caught every whitenss and transparency of glass, the unlighted, washet-out cottages, the flowing curtains beyond, the melancholy notes of what desolation. Nature's worn waste of the blossoms for her sad waiting purposes. His feet trod through drifts of them, in them their bruise came faintly.

He passed the steps of the ghostly house. He felt no surprise that the curtain was billowing in an open window, that the bark of the rancher's dog cut the silence, that a clattering buggy tossed along the deserted road—all as Brock had foretold. Born and bred to superstition, he was completely possessed now by the sense of destiny—the marvels of coincidence are so great that most of us secretly relish now and then at the term. He had

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"For an instant he did not realize . . . then, dumbly, he took it and stood there with it in shaking arms."

had gone to live on the cherry ranch—and then—

It had always been to Filiberto what drink to some men—this vagabondage. Now it was the wheat fields of the north would beckon, again the mines of the mountains, next a tropical island. The ends of the earth have surprises—cherry rancher never has. On the ranch there would be first blooms driving over acres like a northern storm, then corals fanning through leaves, then an army of blue-bloused Chinamen clutching for the corals with swift claws. Always the movement was in the same circle—the flower-blazed, the corals, the blue-bloused Chinamen. And at last the circle becomes maddening . . .

Again Filiberto's eyes fell upon the chitter, the cries, the quiesce, as the tourists alighted. Hustle confusion had burst upon his silent place. It was as if a flock of birds had flown up from the poppy meadows below bringing their babbles with them. The five appeared fifty; they darted about, pointing, exclaiming, peering into the cabin, adjusting films, above all inspecting him. Dazed as he was, Filiberto realized this; that he was the journey's goal, the cause of all this excitement.

"What's it all about?" he demanded of Old Handy.

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